



Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns

NewsNotes

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Current status of bills:
http://thomas.loc.gov

Maryknoll Joint Leadership Statement in Support of Annunciation House

Leadership of the Maryknoll Sisters, Maryknoll Lay Missioners, Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, and Maryknoll Affiliates signed the following statement in solidarity with Annunciation House, a Catholic-affiliated non-profit organization in El Paso, Texas, that operates a group of houses of hospitality for migrants. The statement comes in response to recent attempts by the Texas attorney general to shut down Annunciation House on the grounds of baseless accusations.

February 23, 2024

The four branches of the Maryknoll family are all committed to the dignity of each human being and to living the teachings of the Gospel of Jesus Christ with compassion and justice for all. As the leadership of Maryknoll missioners working in many parts of the world to provide a dignified welcome to people in situations of vulnerability and marginalization, including people seeking safety, we express our solidarity with and support for Annunciation House following the recently declared intent of the Texas Attorney General to end the organization's critical mission.

For more than 45 years, Annunciation House has offered hospitality to thousands of migrants in El Paso, Texas, a border town situated at the heart of the complex and broken U.S. immigration system. We see on the U.S.-Mexico border decades of neglect by the U.S. government to provide a safe, orderly and humane migration process, and now increasingly aggressive responses by the state of Texas that not only punish migrants for the simple act of seeking safety but also target those who offer aid as a response of faith. We assert, as Pope Francis said more than ten years ago, "Migrants and refugees are not pawns on the chessboard of humanity. They are children, women and men who leave or who are forced to leave their homes for various reasons, who share a legitimate desire for knowing and having, but above all for being more." As a nation, we can do better, and examples of acts of compassion and respect for human life are a strength, not a weakness to be eliminated.

Maryknoll missioners have served as volunteers at some of the shelters operated by Annunciation House, where, in coordination with the U.S. Border Patrol and ICE, along with community partners, migrants can find food, clothing and shelter as they prepare to leave El Paso on the next leg of their journey. Rooted in the teachings of Jesus to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable among us, and specifically, to welcome the stranger,

we believe that the mission of Annunciation House, as expressed by its founder Ruben Garcia, exemplifies our Christian commitment to love one another, and makes our society stronger.

Together with Bishop Mark Seitz who described the work of Annunciation House as "an example of our Catholic commitment to the poor, the Christian call to love one's neighbor, and stepping into the breach to take action where many will not," we acknowledge a deep debt of gratitude to Annunciation House. We stand with Annunciation House staff and volunteers as they face this unjust attempt to criminalize their crucial service. §



Photo of the press conference held by Annunciation House, El Paso, Texas, on February 23, 2024, via Facebook. From left to right, El Paso County Judge Ricardo Samaniego, Annunciation House Director Ruben Garcia, Bishop Mark Seitz, and Congresswoman Veronica Escobar.

Faith in Action:

Send a message to the Office of the Attorney General of Texas, expressing your support of the vital and Gospel-centered humanitarian work of Annunciation House and your hope that the attorney general's office will stop this attack on life-saving ministry.

Then send a message to Annunciation House, letting them know of your support and prayers for their continuing service of welcoming the stranger.
<https://mogc.info/AH>

Churches for Middle East Peace Visits the Holy Land

A delegation of U.S. Catholic and Protestant church representatives traveled to the Holy Land in January and share what they encountered.

In January, a delegation of Christian leaders organized by Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP) visited Israel and the West Bank, intensifying efforts to foster peace amid the Israel-Hamas conflict. The delegation, comprised of representatives of CMEP member organizations, including Susan Gunn from the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns, met with a variety of voices—from church leaders and government officials to human rights activists in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Ramallah. Their mission: to absorb firsthand accounts of the crisis, laying the groundwork for effective advocacy in Washington, DC, and at the United Nations in New York.

The trip underscored the profound shared trauma among Jewish Israelis, stemming from the atrocities of October 7, when Hamas militants killed 1,200 people in Israel and took more than 200 hostage into Gaza. The Israeli government's response, driven by a mix of humiliation and a determination to safeguard its people, has since been marked by rhetoric that further entrenches divisions.

In Gaza, the situation has grown dire, with staggering civilian casualties, widespread displacement, and an acute humanitarian crisis, raising alarms of potential ethnic cleansing. The West Bank faces its own set of challenges, with thousands arrested and significant restrictions on movement, painting a picture of a population under siege.

The delegation's encounters offered a wide view of the conflict's complexities and the profound impact on communities caught in the crossfire. From the sanctity of Dominus Flevit Catholic Church, where prayers for ceasefire resonated against the backdrop of Jerusalem's Old City, to the tales of survival at St. Porphyrius Church and Holy Family Church in Gaza, each meeting illuminated the urgent need for a path to peace.

The consensus among those who the delegation met was clear: for a durable peace, immediate actions—including a comprehensive ceasefire, release of hostages and Palestinian prisoners held without charge, and unimpeded humanitarian aid—are crucial. Yet, beyond these immediate steps, addressing the root causes of the conflict, notably the occupation and blockade, is imperative.

U.S. Christians can play a pivotal role in this endeavor, by learning the realities on the ground, elevating Palestinian Christian voices, and mobilizing support for peace initiatives. Through documentaries, prayers, and

advocacy, each of us can contribute to a broader understanding and empathy that transcends borders. We offer the following resources:

Prayer

Prayer for Peace in Israel-Palestine by Rose Berger, published by Sojourners. <https://mogc.info/IP-SOJOprayer>

Join a 30 min. virtual prayer circle 'Praying for Peace' every Wednesday at 12:30pm ET hosted by Churches for Middle East Peace. <https://cmep.org/events/>

Study

Watch a 30 min. News Briefs every Thursday at 10:00am ET by Churches for Middle East Peace: <https://cmep.org/events/>

Watch the one-hour "Trip Report: The Way Forward for Middle East Peace" by Susan Gunn from the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns and Russ Testa from the Franciscan Friars about the Churches for Middle East Peace delegation to the Holy Land in January: <https://mogc.info/CMEPtripreport>

Watch a Webinar on the Middle East Conflict hosted by Thomas Gould of the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns with special guest Lauren Draper of Churches for Middle East Peace: <https://mogc.info/CMEPwebinar>

One-pager of asks for U.S. Congress and White House by Churches for Middle East Peace: <https://mogc.info/CMEP-onepager>

Five-page Fact Sheet "Snapshot of Deprivation of Humanitarian Aid in the Gaza Strip" by international development agencies operating in Gaza in Feb. 2024: <https://mogc.info/GazaDeprivation>

Reflection by Marie Dennis "The violence and grief are overwhelming" about the Israel-Hamas war and a nonviolent process toward peace: <https://mogc.info/NCR-Gaza>

New book by Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb, "Decolonizing Palestine: The Land, The People, The Bible" published by Orbis Books 2023: <https://mogc.info/DecolonizePalestine>

Action

Send a message to President Biden and Congress to ask them to call for a ceasefire. Follow-up with a phone call using the instructions found at the bottom of the webpage: <https://mogc.info/ceasefirenow>

Join the Gaza Ceasefire Pilgrimage by committing to walk 25 miles – the length of Gaza – during the Season of Lent. <https://www.gazaceasefirepilgrimage.com/>

Haiti: Armed Gangs Invade Gros Morne

February 7, traditionally Haiti's Presidential Inauguration Day, was filled with violent protests and gang attacks across the small Caribbean country, including in the town of Gros Morne, home of Maryknoll Lay Missioners in Haiti.

Thousands of frustrated Haitians took to the streets across the country on Feb. 7, to demand that de facto Prime Minister Ariel Henry step down, as required by law on what should have been Haiti's Presidential Inauguration Day. But there have been no elections since the assassination of Jovenel Moïse in July 2021 and violent gangs, often armed with U.S. made weapons, continue to terrorize the people with murders, kidnappings, and sexual assaults.

Eight U.S. senators issued a statement on Feb. 7, calling for the de facto government of Ariel Henry to take steps to hold elections. On Feb. 29, there were news reports stating that Prime Minister Henry has agreed to hold general elections in Haiti by mid-2025.

Armed gangs took advantage of the heightened tension on Feb. 7 to invade the town of Gros Morne, where Maryknoll lay missioners live four hours north of the capital city of Port-au-Prince.

Maryknoll lay missioner Sami Scott and her co-workers operate a henhouse project in Gros-Morne. The ministry provides food security and employment for many of her neighbors and is a model for other communities to follow.

The gang that attacked Gros Morne was heavily armed, shooting up the entire town. Our partners report that there were injuries but no deaths. The community's central market shut down and people fled to their homes. As of Feb. 16, schools and the market remain closed, taking away the community's sources of education, food and income. The main road north out of town is also blocked.

So far the gangs have not returned after their initial incursion, but the entire community is on edge, staying in their homes as much as possible. The pervasive fear and lack of mobility makes it difficult for the community to sustain crucial agricultural and economic development work.

Haiti does not produce arms or ammunition. Haiti's armed groups obtain weapons illegally from the United States. According to a 2023 United Nations report, networks of criminals source guns in states with loose gun laws, and ship them to Florida, where gangs conceal and ship them to Haiti.

"In the five years I have served in Haiti, the number of guns in the hands of criminals has increased dramatically, especially since 2021," said Sami Scott. "These are all

coming into the country illegally. They are all sourced in the U.S. and trafficked here by various routes."

"Everyone I know has been impacted by the gangs," Scott said. "Either they or someone in their family has been robbed, chased off their land or out of their homes, kidnapped, or killed. Haiti cannot know peace or have a chance to prosper until the illegal trafficking of arms is stopped and the gangs that have them are controlled. Any advancement, including elections, education, food security, reforestation, jobs creation, or infrastructure improvements cannot happen until there is security. The United States must stop being complicit in the insecurity of Haiti and the destruction it has caused. The U.S. can stop the illegal trafficking of arms from the U.S. to Haiti. To let it continue is a crime against humanity."

The Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns is working with partners in Washington, DC, to advocate for laws and regulations that would stop the flow of weapons into the Caribbean. Together with the Quixote Center, Sisters of Mercy, and Religious Sisters of Jesus and Mary, we have met with Congressional offices and the Department of Homeland Security to press for stronger and more coordinated action.

An additional root cause of weapons proliferation in Latin American and the Caribbean was a change under the Trump Administration in oversight over export licenses of small arms shipments from the State Department to the Commerce Department, creating fewer registration requirements, less oversight, and more exemptions.

According to Rep. Joaquin Castro of Texas, the change led to a 30% annual increase in arms exports, and in Latin America and the Caribbean, an 82% increase in handgun exports. This is why Rep. Castro introduced the ARMAS Act (HR 6618) last December, to address this issue of export licenses, moving authority back to the State Department and requiring additional oversight and reporting. The Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns has spoken with the offices of Senators Cardin, Van Hollen, and Murphy about developing a Senate version of the bill, with the goal of its passage into law in 2024. §

Faith in action: Ask your Congressional Representative to support the ARMAS Act, to rebuild U.S. oversight of small arms shipments to stop the flow the guns from the United States to Haiti. <https://quixote.org/action#/13>

Sudan: United States Pressures UN to Act

The civil war nears a year old and remains largely ignored despite urgent reports of ethnic killings, dire circumstances.

Since last April, war has ravaged Sudan. As the death toll rises, unparalleled numbers of internally and, increasingly, externally displaced people crowd camps, facing unceasing threats of violence. But with the world's attention on armed conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East, the crisis in Sudan has been largely ignored.

In February, with the pending release of a devastating U.N. Security Council Panel of Experts on Sudan Report on Darfur, outlining killings on a higher scale than previously recognized and naming perpetrators; and the release of a UN Human Rights Office report documenting war crimes and atrocities, the Biden Administration signaled a renewed interest in working for an end to the fighting.

On February 26, Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced the appointment of Tom Perillo as U.S. Special Envoy for Sudan, "to empower Sudanese civilian leaders and drive (U.S.) engagement with partners in Africa, the Middle East, and the international community to forge a united approach to stop this senseless conflict, prevent further atrocities, and promote accountability for crimes already committed."

Two days later, U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Linda Thomas-Greenfield released a statement on the Panel of Experts report. "I am deeply disappointed," she wrote, "that the allegations detailed in this report have received such little attention, both inside the UN Security Council and outside the United Nations... To date, the war in Sudan has displaced eight million people. Communities are barreling towards famine. Disease is rampant. The people of Sudan feel that they have been forgotten. We cannot allow that feeling to become a reality... It is clear that this is an urgent matter of peace and security that demands greater attention from the Security Council. The Council must act urgently to alleviate human suffering, hold perpetrators to account, and bring the conflict in Sudan to an end. Time is running out."

It is not yet clear what actions the United States may propose within the Security Council. Human Rights Watch has suggested that the council "should finally fulfill its mandate to prevent further atrocities in Darfur and act on threats to international and regional security. It can start by adding the names of those responsible for these heinous crimes to the council's sanctions list as part of a broader strategy to end widespread abuses," noting that the Panel of Experts report clearly identifies such actors. These include warlords inside Sudan, and foreign powers such as the United Arab Emirates, which has violated

an arms embargo by shipping arms to the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), one of two main warring factions in Sudan.

Since the conflict began in April between the RSF, led by then-Vice President Mohamed "Hemedti" Hamdan Dagalo, and de-facto President Abdel Fattah al-Burhan's Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), pro-democracy groups in Sudan have urged the international community not to take sides, but to apply sanctions against the warring factions and demand a return to civilian rule. But the armed conflict in Sudan quickly became a proxy war for other regional and global actors.

The United Arab Emirates actively support the RSF. Iran supports and arms the SAF. Russia supports the RAF, with Wagner Group mercenaries joining Sudanese RSF troops on the ground. Multiple reports have also indicated that Ukrainian special forces are in Sudan working alongside the SAF against the RSF and Wagner forces. While Saudi Arabia is generally seen as supporting the SAF in the interest of countering the United Arab Emirates' influence in the region, the Saudis have also worked closely with the United States in trying to mediate peace between the two sides.

In December, the resumption of peace talks was announced for January, but talks have failed to materialize. Dagalo has announced a desire for a ceasefire during recent diplomatic visits to other African countries, but critics question his motives and credibility, and see such visits as an effort to court international support and be seen as a legitimate Sudanese leader for the future, after toppling a democratic, civilian-led transition government together with Burhan in 2021.

The UN Human Rights Office reports that more than 8 million Sudanese people have been displaced in the conflict. Most are internally displaced people (IDPs), but over half a million have fled into neighboring Chad, and hundreds of thousands more have fled to South Sudan, overrunning UN camps already crowded with South Sudanese IDPs, especially in Malakal, where Maryknoll Fr. Mike Bassano served as a chaplain for 10 years before leaving in June 2023.

The United Nations had previously reported a total of approximately 12,000 deaths in the conflict since April, but the Panel of Experts report documents as many as 15,000 deaths in one city alone, El Geneina in West Darfur. The total killed in the conflict is unknown. War crimes and grievous human rights abuses are documented in the report. Read the report at <https://mogc.info/Darfur> §

Biden Administration Pauses Natural Gas

Longterm investments in fossil fuel infrastructure, which have the potential to spew methane, were halted.

Organized efforts by front line U.S. communities of the Gulf Coast and the Permian Basin led to the surprising and powerful decision of the Biden Administration to pause the permitting process for new liquified natural gas (LNG) export projects. It is a decision that the White House says will help the United States meet its climate change goals by eliminating emissions equivalent to 675 coal-fired power plants.

The pause will require that proposed projects take into consideration the impacts that LNG facilities have on the climate, communities, and national security.

Referring to the climate crisis as “the existential threat of our time,” President Biden stated that he would “heed the calls of young people and frontline communities who are using their voices to demand action from those with the power to act.”

LNG production and export facilities are often proposed and located in low-income communities, communities of color, and Indigenous and tribal lands, leading to asthma, lung and cardiovascular disease, cancer, preterm births, and premature deaths.

The pause in the mass expansion of U.S. LNG exports cannot be understated. In 2023, the U.S. became the largest exporter of LNG, with President Biden overseeing the largest volume of oil exported in recorded history last year. Massive projected expansion of LNG export terminals would double that by 2028.

The fossil fuel industry has been trying to sell the false narrative that liquefied natural gas is a climate solution to much dirtier coal. Studies show, however, that LNG might be even more dangerous for the climate than coal as it spews methane, which warms the climate at a rate 80 times greater than carbon dioxide over its lifetime. Additional emissions are also created along LNG export supply chains through production, transport, liquefaction, shipping, and combustion.

Over 170 scientists penned a letter to President Biden stating “As scientists we are telling you in clear and unambiguous terms that approving CP2 and other LNG projects will undermine your stated goals of meaningfully addressing the climate crisis and put us on a continued path toward escalating climate chaos.”

The pause in LGN exports also will help the pocket-books of U.S. households. Ramping up exports ties the domestic gas market to dramatically higher prices in the international market forcing U.S. residents to pay much more for everything from heating to food prices.

The war in Ukraine was used by the fossil fuel industry to justify the expansion of LNG exports, insisting that U.S. LNG was needed to replace Russian gas in Europe and elsewhere. Some civil society organizations and parliamentarians in the EU spoke out with a message to the contrary. A letter by these organizations to President Biden and U.S. Secretary of Energy Jennifer Granholm informed that “Europe’s existing gas supply network is sufficient, taking into account both its own import infrastructure and U.S. LNG export infrastructure.”

After the announcement of Biden’s pause, global congratulatory messages poured in. French economist Laurence Tubiana, a major architect of the Paris climate agreement stated, “The U.S. decision to pause permitting for new LNG export facilities is an act of global leadership, putting the historic agreement at COP28 to transition away from fossil fuels into practice.”

But the most effective pressure calling on Biden to make this decision came from communities directly affected by the proposed build out of LNG projects. According to Cheyenne Rendon, Senior Policy Officer of Society of Native Nations “this ‘pause’ wouldn’t have been considered nor executed if there wasn’t weight behind our voices. Our Nation needs to lead by example and prioritize Human Health and Rights over false solutions such as LNG.”

Climate justice organizations and frontline communities were planning to descend upon Washington in early February to protest the expansion of LNG exports with a lineup of marches, rallies and sit ins. The Biden administration announced the pause just one week before the planned activities were set to begin

Roishetta Ozane, Director of the Vessel Project of Louisiana called Biden’s pause “monumental.” At the same time, she warned, “we cannot afford to let up in our efforts to hold decision-makers accountable and ensure that frontline communities are no longer subjected to the harmful effects of these industries. This announcement is a reason to celebrate, but it is also a reminder that our work is far from over.”

Indeed, Republican in the House of Representatives wasted no time in passing a bill soon after Biden’s announced pause with the misleading name of “Unlocking our Domestic LNG Potential Act (H.R. 7176). The bill is not expected to be taken up by the Senate. Nonetheless it is a message that putting the interest of the planet and frontline communities before fossil fuel companies will require the support of all of us. §

Brookings Releases Foresight Africa 2024

The Brookings Institution published the 2024 edition of Foresight Africa, offering a positive outlook for the continent despite serious challenges.

In the introduction of the Brookings Institution's annual report on what to expect for Africa in 2024, Aloysius Uche Ordo, overall editor of Foresight Africa 2024, names reasons to be "cautiously optimistic." Despite difficulties in 2023, namely record high inflation, severe currency depreciations, and heavy debt burdens, he points to the research and analysis division of the British magazine *The Economist* that forecasts Africa to be the world's second fastest-growing region, with 12 of the 20 fastest growing economies in 2024.

During a conference to launch the report on Jan. 26, a panel member commented on one of the thematic issues named in the report: governance. Because of the many coups in Africa in recent years, we can now go from the coast of West Africa all the way to the Coast of East Africa and never set foot in a democratically elected country. But even elections are not a guarantee of democracy. The key question is legitimacy: is government just a colonial leftover or a real provider of services?

The first two issues named in the report, development financing and climate change, have interlinking components. The continent of Africa is positioned at the epicenter of the climate challenge and 2023 was the hottest year ever recorded. Africa bore the brunt of devastating climate impacts, as evidenced by drought in the Horn of Africa, cyclones in northern Mozambique, and torrential floods in more than a dozen countries. Yet Africa contributes least to this crisis, serves as the "lungs" of the world (Congo, Okavango and other river basins), and is a repository of critical minerals needed for the global energy transition. However, Africa receives the least amount of global financing to address this difficult collective problem.

The Brookings Institution recommends the following actionable goals: mobilizing domestic resources, strengthening financial systems, and ensuring that development funds are used as intended. It is also necessary that International Financial Institutions (IFIs) robustly increase the replenishments to their funds to enable African climate mitigation and adaptation, as well as to finance its energy transition.

There are twenty mineral-rich countries in Africa, as measured by those whose mineral exports comprise more than 25% of its exports. Africa needs an ambitious but practical approach to value addition, so that it is not just exporting commodities. Africa must become a strategic partner in the global community, which has the demand

for Africa's minerals. One promising initiative is the U.S. funded Lobito Corridor, a railway line from the DRC and Zambia, taking critical minerals to the port of Lobito in Angola for export to North America. The countries involved should make this a mature trade relationship, a true partnership.

Chapters three to five of the report grapple with the overwhelming necessity to create jobs in Africa. By the middle of this century one in four workers globally will be in Africa and, throughout this century, 90% of global workforce growth will be in Africa. The focus of Chapter Three is on empowerment of entrepreneurship in Africa, where most new jobs are created.

Chapter Four describes the efforts to scale up the Africa Continental Free Trade Area Agreement, which holds far greater opportunities of economic and job growth. Chapter Five discusses a key tool in job growth, namely technology, and specifically the digitization of services, commerce, education and other aspects of life in Africa. Many countries have developed national digital economy policies to foster innovation and entrepreneurship for both job creation and poverty reduction.

Chapter Six looks at the issue of gender. Wanjira Mathai writes that 30 million girls in Sub-Saharan Africa are not in primary school and 50 million are missing out of secondary school education. Women and girls have borne the brunt of all the recent shocks, such as environmental disasters, Covid, and high prices of food. Mathai says that the women themselves are confronting these challenges with courage, creativity and resilience and building solutions that make their communities safer and stronger. Policies and funding are needed to expand their access to education, including at the tertiary level, investment in clean energy and green tech sectors, and insistence on equality in political representation.

With regard to governance, the final chapter, the report states: "Declining resistance to military rule and tolerance of military intervention are more of a reaction to the failure of elected leaders to meet citizens' democratic aspirations than an attraction to the military rule per se." The report recommends strong condemnation of coups by the African Union and regional economic communities, and aid conditionality to promote democracy and human rights. The report has 77 authors of whom nearly half are women. §

Read the full report here: <https://mogc.info/Foresight2024>

UN: 62nd Session of the Commission for Social Development

Maryknoll Sister Margaret Lacson reports some observations on the UN annual meetings to foster social development and justice.

The 62nd Session of the Commission for Social Development (CSocD62) held from 5-14 February 2024 at the UN in New York, focused on fostering social development and justice to expedite progress on the 2030 Agenda and poverty eradication.

The Maryknoll Sisters were represented at the sessions by Sister Margaret Lacson, who shared her observations of the commission.

The 62nd session's discussions were anchored around the urgent need for inclusive social policies that not only aim to eradicate poverty but also ensure that the benefits of digital transformation contribute to inclusive growth and development. This focus was particularly pertinent given the rapid pace of technological advancements and their implications for social justice. The commemoration of the 30th anniversary of the Year of the Family also provided a timely opportunity to reflect on the evolving concept of family within the context of social development.

The Maryknoll Sisters joined with other UN-accredited NGOs on the Committee for Social Development to prepare for the sessions. The committee's efforts included a review of the implementation of the Copenhagen Declaration, drafting a Civil Society Declaration, and engagement with delegates from Member States to advocate for priority areas. The Civil Society Forum, held during the conference, provided the space for civil society groups to strategize on the session's themes and engage in meaningful networking.

Last September, we shared the stark updates from the UN on the limited progress achieved so far on the Sustainable Development Goals. Midway to 2030, the Sustainable Development Goals of 2015 are woefully behind schedule. As of Fall 2023, only 12 percent of the targets on most of the goals had been reached and some goals had degraded. The lack of success is most evident in the state of global access to clean water and food and nutrition. 2.4 billion people are living in water stressed countries and an estimated 2.4 billion individuals, largely women and residents of rural areas, do not have consistent access to nutritious, safe, and sufficient food. The failure, the UN Secretary General said in 2023, was due to the lack of commitment of member states to live up to the promises they made in 2015, when

they unanimously agreed to these goals. The central issue is the failure of nations to provide the funding they promised. The global situation, characterized by social inequalities, extreme poverty, gender disparities, economic instability, and environmental crises, underscored the urgency of the discussions at CSocD62.

Representatives of nation states and civil society at the CSocD62 emphasized the need for access to fundamental services such as healthcare, education, clean water, and sanitation, as well as the importance of decent jobs, labor rights, and universal, gender-responsive social protection.

High-level panel discussions delved into how social policies can become more effective in achieving inclusive, resilient, and equitable societies. Topics included the impact of digital transformation on social justice, good practices in promoting social development, and innovative solutions to social challenges. A special panel focused on the 30th anniversary of the International Year of the Family, exploring the role of families in social development.

The resolutions passed by the session reflected a strong commitment to strengthening solidarity, social inclusion, and cohesion. A draft resolution on promoting care and support systems for social development emphasized the need to recognize, reduce, and redistribute unpaid care work and improve the conditions of care and domestic workers.

NGO members of the Committee for Social Development were active participants in the CSocD62. The chairperson of the committee highlighted priority concerns and introduced the Civil Society Declaration during the opening session. Side events and the Civil Society Forum facilitated further discussion and collaboration among participants.

As the session concluded, the global community was reminded of the critical role of social policies in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and the vision of a more equitable, inclusive, and just world. The session highlighted the need for universal social protection, decent jobs, and rights-based, gender-responsive policies. Resolutions passed included a focus on care support systems and a call for stronger solidarity and social cohesion for future sessions. §

Somaliland: Fraught Quest for Independence

Somalia's breakaway region of Somaliland signed an agreement with landlocked Ethiopia to give it access to the sea by way of Somaliland's coastline. The agreement could reshape geopolitics in the Horn of Africa.

Since proclaiming independence from Somalia in 1991, the federal state of Somaliland has been a beacon of stability in the chaotic Horn of Africa region, printing its own currency, issuing its own passports and running regular democratic elections for its leaders. However, its goal of independence has gone unrecognized internationally, until this January, when landlocked Ethiopia offered to give formal recognition of Somaliland independence in return for access to the port of Berbera on the Gulf of Aden, setting off a firestorm in the Federal Republic of Somalia.

The agreement not only gives Ethiopia access to the port facilities but also use of a leased military base on the Gulf. In return for this access Ethiopia agreed to formally recognize Somaliland independence.

Somaliland's foreign ministry stated: "This is a significant diplomatic milestone for our country."

Ironically, this agreement was signed only a few days after Somalia and Somaliland had agreed to resume dialogue about their mutual relations after years of stalemate and the government of Somalia in Mogadishu reacted with fury, stating: "The Ethiopia government's actions constitute a blatant disregard for international norms and legal frameworks, representing a brazen violation of Somali territorial sovereignty and undermining the progress achieved through ongoing dialogue that was nearing a resolution."

Ethiopia's economy has been constrained by lack of access to its own port on the Red Sea but this unilateral agreement with Somaliland has worried its neighbors. Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed repeated his vow that it did not intend to invade any country (meaning Eritrea, with which it has had persistent tensions), but merely that it needed access to a port, explaining: "Ethiopia is a nation whose existence is tied to the Red Sea."

The Memorandum of Understanding between Ethiopia and Somaliland was signed on January 1, and within a few days the international community reacted unanimously in rejecting Somaliland independence and called for restraint. The British Embassy in Mogadishu stated: "The UK is concerned by escalating tensions in the Horn of Africa. We reaffirm our full respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Somalia and we urge restraint and dialogue to peacefully resolve issues." This position was seconded

by the United States, the European Union, the African Union and the Arab League.

Somaliland was previously known as British Somaliland, a protectorate under Great Britain from 1884 up to June 26, 1960, when it was the first Somali territory to gain independence. Four days later, it united with the southern states of Somalia, formerly administered by Italy. Even going back to antiquity it has been a distinct territory, not in opposition to the rest of Somalia as all the people speak the one language of Somali, but at the same time preferring their own autonomy and independence.

There are 5.7 million people in Somaliland, with a per capita income of only \$850, kept poor due to its isolation internationally and lack of formal recognition. Not all international actors reject its search for independence; several countries have set up trade offices and other forms of formal presence in Somaliland, and some Members of Parliament in Great Britain have called for recognition of Somaliland independence. Thus, although it will give up some control of its land and facilities to Ethiopia, it has much to gain economically from the agreement and recognition.

The African Union's Peace and Security Council met on January 17 and called for restraint and meaningful dialogue. It expressed "deep concern over the ongoing tension and its potential adverse impact on peace, stability and security of the region." On January 18 the eight member states of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in Eastern Africa called for Ethiopia and Somalia to resolve their differences through dialogue, while again re-affirming support for the territorial integrity of Somalia.

IGAD and the African Union have two goals: to prevent conflict escalating to military conflict; and to prevent any further secessions of territories in Africa in a unilateral attempt to assert full independence. South Sudan did become independent in 2011, but if Somaliland's independence was recognized internationally there is a fear that this would cascade into other territories in Africa demanding their own independence.

As February comes to a close, the port deal has not yet been implemented, but neither Somalia or Ethiopia are willing to come to a mutual table for dialogue. IGAD and the African Union are continuing to monitor this situation. §

Doomsday Clock 90 Seconds to Midnight Again

Symbolic clock indicates the world remains perilously close to catastrophe.

The Science and Security Board of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists has decided to keep the Doomsday Clock set at 90 seconds to midnight for a second consecutive year. For 77 years, the Doomsday Clock has been set annually based on the state of world affairs, especially under the threat of nuclear annihilation, as a visual symbol of how close the world is to apocalyptic global catastrophe.

In a statement on Jan. 23 explaining the decision, the members of the board wrote that they “have been deeply worried about the deteriorating state of the world.” They set the Doomsday Clock at two minutes to midnight in 2019 and at 100 seconds to midnight in 2022. Last year, they moved the clock to 90 seconds to midnight—the closest to global catastrophe it has ever been—in large part because of Russian threats to use nuclear weapons in the war in Ukraine.

Board members said they chose to keep the clock set at 90 seconds to midnight because “humanity continues to face an unprecedented level of danger.” Rather than growing complacent with this position, they want the world to see it as a “stark warning and respond urgently, as if today were the most dangerous moment in modern history. Because it may well be.”

In recent decades, the board has considered new existential threats such as climate change, together with the nuclear threat, in deciding how to set the clock. The current report cites several threats that led to the decision to leave the clock set so close to Doomsday:

The nuclear risk remains dire, particularly as wars involving nuclear powers, Russia and Israel, threaten to escalate and expand to wider regional conflicts and tensions rise between nuclear-armed states while the international arms control regime continues to crumble.

Russia’s war in Ukraine continues unabated, while President Putin has suspended Russian participation in the New START arms control treaty, sent tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus, and Russia withdrew from the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. Meanwhile, the United States has suspended certain elements of its own participation in New START in response, has never signed the test ban treaty.

“Nuclear spending... in the three largest nuclear powers—China, Russia, and the United States—threaten to trigger a three-way nuclear arms race as the world’s arms control architecture collapses,” the report states. Meanwhile, Iran continues to develop near-weapons-grade plutonium, the Iran nuclear deal is no closer to being salvaged, North

Korea continues to develop nuclear weapons, and nuclear weapons state Israel’s war on Gaza continues to spread, threatening a wider and unpredictable regional conflict.

Climate change is also a risk as progress toward the Paris Agreement goals remains slower than is needed, and even a record-breaking \$1.7 trillion global investment in renewable energy and new renewable energy commitments by countries representing half the world’s gross domestic product are offset by continuing trillion-dollar investment in fossil fuels. The year 2023 was the “hottest year on record and global greenhouse gas emissions continued to rise.”

Biological threats are increasingly alarming in the wake of the COVID 19 pandemic, as advances in biotechnology increase the risk of weaponized and accidentally-released disease – a threat made more volatile through advances in artificial intelligence (AI).

Disruptive technologies, too, are a growing factor in deciding the setting of the Doomsday Clock. In particular, multiple uses of AI advance nuclear and conventional-weapons and biological dangers, and undermine democratic systems through the proliferation of misinformation.

“AI has great potential to magnify disinformation and corrupt the information environment on which democracy depends. AI-enabled disinformation efforts could be a factor that prevents the world from dealing effectively with nuclear risks, pandemics, and climate change,” according to the report. “Military uses of AI are accelerating. Of particular concern are lethal autonomous weapons, which identify and destroy targets without human intervention. Decisions to put AI in control of important physical systems—in particular, nuclear weapons—could indeed pose a direct existential threat to humanity.”

Catholic Church leaders, too, have been sounding the alarm about many of these threats. Pope Francis has sharpened church teaching on the climate and integral ecology with *Laudato Si’*; advanced the Church’s position on nuclear weapons by condemning their possession, even for the purpose of deterrence; and he dedicated his 2024 World Day of Peace Message to the issue of AI. §

Faith in action: On January 27, Pax Christi USA offered an online forum, “Building A World Without Nuclear Weapons: An Urgent Imperative,” featuring Santa Fe Archbishop John Wester, Pax Christi International’s Marie Dennis, and Dr. Ira Helfand of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons.

Watch the recording: <https://mogc.info/PaxChristiNukes>

Mil-palabras for Milpas, Trade, and Food Justice

The United States challenges Mexico's policy of limiting the importation of genetically modified corn and glyphosate. The following is an excerpt from an article by Karen Hansen-Kuhn, published by the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy on Nov 20, 2023.

The Milpa system is an agroecological cropping method in Mexico dating back thousands of years in which complementary crops such as corn, beans and squash are cultivated together in ways that nurture the soil and our bodies. Mexican civil society groups, noting the play on words, joined with their allies in the United States and Canada to provide 1,000-word (mil palabras) statements to the official U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) trade dispute process defending Mexico's right to limit genetically modified (GM) corn and glyphosate.

Whether or not the dispute panel accepts all of the submissions, the range of issues covered will enrich the public debate on how trade rules could limit—or allow for—sustainable solutions that advance public health, human rights and economic opportunities.

The Mexican government announced its plans to transition away from imports of GM corn and the use of glyphosate shortly after President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador took office in 2019. It responded to years of concerted efforts by social movements, including successful advocacy efforts and litigation led by the Sin Maíz No Hay País (Without Corn, No Country) campaign to prevent planting of GM corn and protect the country's cultural heritage and biodiversity.

The initial decree called for phasing out the use of glyphosate and of imports of GM corn by 2024. The revised decree issued in February 2023 continues the phaseout of glyphosate, will eliminate the use of GM corn in flour and tortillas for direct human consumption.

U.S. producers and traders of GM corn and their allies in Congress, as well as U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, have complained vigorously against these plans since they were first announced, insisting that the policies violate the terms of the USMCA. The formal U.S. request for a USMCA panel on August 17 focused on what the U.S. calls the Tortilla Corn Ban and the Substitution Instruction. The U.S. asserts that the Mexican government's actions violate Sanitary and Phytosanitary Standards (food and plant safety provisions) in the agreement, saying the decisions were not based on international standards or risk assessment principles and discriminate against U.S. exports. Even though it does not export corn to Mexico, Canada joined the complaint as a third party.

Under USMCA dispute rules, non-governmental

entities may submit requests of up to 1,000 words outlining longer submissions that they would develop to inform the dispute resolution process. Those requests were due on November 7, 20 days after the final dispute panelist was confirmed. Groups submitting requests in support of Mexico's corn policies include IATP (with the Rural Coalition and Alianza Nacional de Campesinas), Friends of the Earth, Center for Food Safety, Farm Action, and Tufts University in the U.S.; and several others.

The submissions emphasized several distinct but overlapping themes:

- The inadequacy of current studies on the safety of GM corn for human consumption, both because of conflicts of interest among scientists involved in reports and the failure of existing studies to consider the human health impacts of GM corn consumption when it comprises such a significant part of the Mexican diet.
- The imperative to take a precautionary approach to these uncertainties, as provided for in the USMCA text.
- The relationship between the U.S. claims that the Mexican programs violate USMCA rules on Sanitary and Phytosanitary standards and new provisions in the agreement protecting Indigenous legal rights. This would include an analysis of the General Exception protecting Indigenous legal rights in USMCA Article 32.5 considering Mexico's laws and Constitution and the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and related protections for Indigenous rights and biological diversity articulated in USMCA's Environment Chapter.
- The cultural and environmental risks of the entry of GM corn into Mexico, considering the diversity of at least 59 native corn breeds that are in constant diversification and adaptation by Indigenous peoples in different parts of the country.

...

The next step in the process is for the panelists to inform the groups if they are invited to make longer submissions (up to 10 pages) expanding on these issues. Of course, there's nothing to stop the groups from developing and publicizing more detailed analysis in any case, and many of the groups involved will likely do just that. We hope the panel will consider the ample evidence and solid analysis in support of Mexico's food sovereignty in deciding this case. §

El Salvador Re-elects Incumbent

A historic election in El Salvador's history concludes with reelection for Nayib Bukele and the New Ideas Party.

On Sunday, February 4th, Salvadorans around the world took to the polls to elect a President and legislature.

The election was historic in many respects. It was the first time since the civil war that an incumbent was on the ballot. It was the first election in El Salvador to introduce online voting – with all the security complications that that entails. It was also the first election to have physical voting locations abroad.

Yet with a 90% approval rating in the polls, the incumbent President Nayib Bukele was expected to easily win reelection.

President Bukele is a complicated figure. At age 37, he was elected to the presidency of a mostly Catholic El Salvador as the son of a Palestinian imam and the husband to a wife with Sephardic Jewish ancestry. President Bukele is a crypto currency enthusiast who has described himself as a businessman, “philosopher king,” and “the world’s coolest dictator.” He is the first President to seek a second five-year term having stacked the courts with judges who approved an unconstitutional re-election bid.

But his overwhelming popularity stems from the dramatic decrease in the homicide rate during his tenure. In a crackdown on organized crime, President Bukele initiated a “state of exception,” that suspended habeas corpus and resulted in the mass imprisonment of over 70,000 people – most without convictions. The homicide rate in El Salvador went from over 50 per capita in 2018 to 2.4 per capita in 2023. Meanwhile, the World Prison Brief named El Salvador the most imprisoned population in the world, by far, with over twice the per-capita rate of the United States. Human rights advocates have documented 190 deaths and 5,000 abuses related to the policy. We reported these details of abuse of power in previous editions of NewsNotes.

President Bukele’s popularity was especially in evidence abroad. By January 10th, little less than a month away from voting day, over 51,000 votes were submitted online from outside of El Salvador. This number was twelve times the number of Salvadoran voters who voted abroad in 2019. Thomas Gould, from the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns, volunteered as a non-partisan observer of the election abroad for the Center for Interchange and Solidarity (CIS) at one voting location in Virginia. There, and at other locations in the DC metro area, President Bukele came away with over 97% percent of the vote.

But much like the candidate, the outcome was complicated. President Bukele’s victory was augmented by a flood of well-organized and well-funded partisan volunteers who flouted election rules against electioneering outside of the polls. Branded T-shirts, calendars, and goodie bags were distributed to those who would wait in line. In the Virginia voting location, partisan observers would pull dozens of people out of the line to assist them in voting online under their close supervision.

Within El Salvador, there were reports of intimidation and even infiltration of the Supreme Election Tribunal (TSE) by the Attorney General’s office, which sometimes resulted in the usurpation of the TSE’s control over boxes of ballots.

While President Bukele’s campaign likely did not need to resort to any of these tactics in order to win, the New Ideas party opted to deploy the tactics anyway. This decision mars what might have been a more clear democratic mandate. In the long-term, it is likely a mistake that will cast a shadow over President Bukele’s latest term. §



Photo of election material illegally distributed outside of the Herndon, Virginia polling site on election day.

United States: Religious Worker Visas Hindered

Rule changes initiated by the US Department of State have resulted in backlogs for noncitizen religious workers seeking visas, resulting in onerous consequences for religious workers and their communities.

The process by which non-citizen religious workers, including Catholic Fathers, Brothers, and Sisters receive visas to work in the United States has recently become a lot harder.

Religious workers and missionaries who are not US citizens require a Religious Worker Visa (R1). This visa is usually valid for five years. If the noncitizen worker is assigned to work in the US for a longer time, they must adjust their immigration status and apply for a Legal Permanent Resident visa, commonly called the Green Card, before their R1 visa expires.

In March 2023, the US Department of State issued a bulletin and notice describing changes to the dates and deadlines associated with filing for employment-based visas. The changes announced in the bulletin exacerbated the COVID-induced backlog, reduced the number of permanent residencies available to religious workers, and made it difficult for foreign-born religious workers to attain permanent residency on time. Previously, the process would take about a year or two. Today, the minimum wait time for the application is more than five years, which means the R1 visa (temporary nonimmigrant visa) that allows religious workers to serve in the US will run out before the permanent residency status can be conferred. The noncitizen religious workers would therefore be forced to depart the US for a period of at least one year in order to apply for a new R1 visa. The

departure of religious workers would impact not only the religious worker, but also the worker's community, and congregation.

In a letter written by the Catholic Legal Immigration Network Inc., several religious groups, concerned individuals, and advocates expressed to the Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Consular Affairs and the Director of the US Citizenship & Immigration Services (USCIS) their concerns about the negative impacts of the changes announced in the bulletin last year. They urged the Department of State (DOS) and the USCIS to reconsider the recent changes to minimize the harm to religious workers and their communities.

The letter reiterated a previous letter by CLINIC and the US Conference of Catholic Bishops in which they recommended:

- Reducing the time frame that religious workers are required to stay outside the US after their R1 visas expire to not more than 30 days. This action would minimize the negative impact caused by short staffing.
- Providing training for their officers to ensure religious workers are not unfairly delayed or denied upon applying for a new R1 visa.
- And implementing policies on a phased timeline to give religious organizations ample time to plan for their religious workers. §

Virtual Good Friday Way of the Cross for Economic and Ecological Justice

Sign up for the live zoom event for the annual Good Friday Way of the Cross for Economic and Ecological Justice, sponsored by Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns and other Catholic and faith groups in Washington, DC.

Good Friday

Mar 29, 2024 12:00 PM Eastern Time

Sign up:

<https://mogc.info/WotC2024>

The observance of Christ's Passion is an opportunity to reflect on the ways we have broken our covenant with God at the expense of other persons and creation. At each station we will focus on a different economic and ecological challenge or sign of hope for our times. People of all faiths are welcome.

Resources

1. **Lenten Reflection Guide:** Download the guide with reflections beginning on Ash Wednesday, **Feb. 14** through Palm Sunday, **Mar. 24**
<https://mogc.info/Lent2024>
2. **Event: Virtual Good Friday Way of the Cross for Economic and Ecological Justice** for **Mar. 29**, noon ET, details and registration at <https://mogc.info/WotC-2023>
3. **Churches for Middle East Peace 40th Anniversary Advocacy Summit, April 9-11**, In-person in Washington, DC. <https://mogc.info/CMEP-Summit>
4. **Ecumenical Advocacy Days Spring Summit, May 17–May 18** Inperson at the Crowne Plaza in Arlington, VA , with and optional off-site worship service on Sunday, **May 19**. Room reservation deadline is **April 16**. Registration at <https://advocacydays.org/>
5. “**In Gaza, water is life,**” article published in The Christian Century, by Ben Norquist and Rev. Mae Elise Cannon. <https://mogc.info/CC-GWL>
6. **Israel-Palestine Conflict Resources for Prayer-Study-Action** compiled by MOGC. <https://mogc.info/Israel-Palestine-Resources>
7. **Webinar recording: “Telling the Truth about the Border: A Humane Vision for Border Management”** hosted by the Center for Migration Studies of New York. <https://mogc.info/HumaneBorder>
8. **Report: Domsday Clock - Current Time** by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists on how close we are to destroying our world with dangerous technologies of our own making <https://mogc.info/Doomsday>
9. **Act: Sign a petition to the World Bank - Stop financing evictions and human rights abuses in Tanzania** by Rainforest Rescue, for an end to financing the project which expands the Ruaha National Park in areas where more than 20,000 people live and raise cattle. <https://mogc.info/RainforestRescue>
10. **Statement: “Rights group welcomes UN Special Rapporteur Irene Khan’s call for Marcos Jr. to abolish NTF-ELCAC, act decisively against red tagging”** by the International Coalition for Human Rights in the Philippines on Feb. 4. <https://mogc.info/ICHRP-RedTagging>
11. **Brief: Legal action for Dreamers** - Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns joined United We Dream and 115 organizations in filing in an amicus brief to the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals in Texas v. United States in support of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. <https://mogc.info/DACA-Amicus>
12. **News Release: Archdiocese of Chicago Shifts to Renewable Energy.** Cardinal Blase J. Cupich announced that the archdiocese, including its nearly 400 parishes and schools, and offices, will shift its entire electricity purchase to 100% renewable, effective in January 2024. <https://mogc.info/CHI-Renewables>
13. **Statement: Cardinal McElroy of San Diego and Archbishop Wester of Santa Fe call for ceasefire in Gaza, release of hostages** in a joints statement on Jan. 17, <https://mogc.info/McElroy-Wester-Ceasefire>
14. **New Book: “The Gospel of Peace: A Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke from the Perspective of Nonviolence”** by John Dear published by Orbis Books, 2023. <https://mogc.info/GospelofPeace>
15. **Webinar: “Mission and Ministry in South America.”** with Fr. Steve Judd, M.M. <https://mogc.info/MM-webinars>
16. **Webinar: on “A Look Back on Mission and Nepal and New Mission with Native Americans”** with Fr. Joe Thaler, M.M. <https://mogc.info/MM-webinars>
17. **Take action: Solidarity with Annunciation House.** <https://mogc.info/AH>
18. **Take action: Tell Congress to Pass the FOREST Act** <https://mogc.info/FORESTact>
19. **Take action: Endorse the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty.** Learn why we need the FFNPT and how to endorse it. <https://fossilfuel treaty.org/>
20. **Take action: Advocate for the Rights of Immigrant Religious Workers** <https://mogc.info/R-1visas>
21. **Article: International Womens Day** published by UN Women in anticipation of International Women’s Day Mar. 8 <https://mogc.info/Intl-WomensRights2024>
22. **Maryknoll Lay Missioners Webinar** Join us on **Mar. 15**, 1PM ET to learn about Maryknoll Lay Missioners and discern if mission is right for you. <https://mogc.info/MKLM-Webinars>